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ABSTRACT

A self-administered communication proficiency and training survey was completed by 122 female professionals and 80 of their direct supervisors in a study that investigated the perceptions supervisors have of their female employees' communication proficiency. The questionnaire for the female professionals asked for assessment of their present level of proficiency and their future training needs for a variety of communication competency areas. The survey for supervisors requested a proficiency assessment and future training need identification for a specific subordinate participating in the research project. The categories for self- and supervisory evaluation were business writing, interviewing, group decision making processes, oral presentations, managing conflict, leadership/management techniques, interpersonal relationships, communications technology, listening, motivating people, handling grievances, giving directions, delegating authority, negotiating skills, and diagnosing organizational problems. Results revealed that in terms of communication proficiency, females and their supervisors agreed on three items: business writing, oral presentations, and communications technology. As for communication training needs, agreement was found on four items: interviewing, oral presentations, communications technology, and diagnosing organizational problems. (HOD)

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COMMUNICATION PROFICIENCY AND FUTURE TRAINING NEEDS OF THE FEMALE PROFESSIONAL: SELF-ASSESSMENT VERSUS SUPERVISORS' EVALUATIONS

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ABSTRACT

This research investigates the perceptions supervisors have of their female employees' communication proficiency, assuming, as has been repeatedly discussed in the literature, that communication skills are a critical component of organizational effectiveness and promotability. In particular, comparisons were made between evaluations of supervisors on a variety of communication competencies and female employees' self-evaluations. Similar comparisons were made between the supervisors' assessment of the importance of future training in each skill and the females' own assessment of their need for future training. While this research is exploratory in nature, the results demonstrate striking and potentially important differences between the perceptions of female professionals and their supervisors.

INTRODUCTION

In the last decade, with more and more females entering the labor force, managerial women have become the focus of a growing body of research. Researchers have asked: Are women really equipped to play the corporate game? Do they fear success? Do they have what it takes to become successful managers? What do top executives think about women managers? How do men feel about working for women? Who or what is responsible for the stereotype that female managers are less competent than their male counterparts? (Donnell & Hall, 1980).

REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

Despite the bias underlying such research questions, when actual behaviors and preferences for behaviors of male and female managers are compared, researchers find few differences. Shockley (1981), for example, found no differences in the choice of conflict style reported by male and female managers. Likewise, Birdsall (1978) found that female and male managers used similar communication styles during staff meetings. Obsorn and Vicars (1976), in their data from two organizations, found no consistent effect of leader sex on leader behavior or on subordinate satisfaction. According to Knudson (1982), women trained in management are as assertive as men and perform equally well on the job. In fact, a comprehensive review of the literature on leadership by Bartol (1977) indicated little difference in female and male leaders' styles of leadership, levels of job satisfaction, or group output. Donnell and Hall (1980) in a large-scale, multifaceted study of 2000 male and female

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managers' managerial philosophy, motivation to work, participative practices, interpersonal competence, and management style found only two overall differences: Female managers' work motivation profiles were more "achieving", and male managers were more open and candid with their colleagues. In sum, however, after reviewing thirty-two leadership studies, Brown (1979) reports that "practicing managers overwhelmingly feel that there is no difference between male and female leadership styles" (p. 607).

Despite such reports of similar performance by males and females, women tend to remain in low-level management positions, rather than advance up the ranks, as by comparison, do their male counterparts (Day & Stogdill, 1972). In their study of women in management training programs, Shockley and Staley (1980) found that 70% of respondents reported that women were not promoted as frequently as men in their organizations. Indeed, upward mobility rates, which differ between men and women, contribute to currently reported salary discrepancies of between $2,000 and $18,000, depending on the work sector reviewed (Fraker, 1984). As pointed out by Staley (1984) "reports of no differences in male-female leadership behavior may have little to do with the attitudinal and practical difficulties women face" (p. 323).

In contrast to such reports of few differences in actual behaviors, many studies of perceived differences and differences in attitudes toward male and female managers also exist. Schein (1973) and later Massengill and DiMarco (1979), asked male middle managers to rate women in general, men in general, and successful middle managers on their characteristics,

attitudes, and temperaments. On 60 of 86 items, managers and men were rated similarly; however, on only 8 items were women rated as similar to successful middle managers. Feldman-Summers and Kiesler (1974) were not able to find a single occupation, including those which are traditionally considered to be "female", in which females were expected to be more successful than males. Similarly, several studies have pointed out that in masculine sex-typed tasks, identical performance by males and females is often attributed to different explanations--for females, luck; for males, ability (Deaux & Emswiller, 1974; Terborg & Ilgen, 1975; cited in Rose, 1978).

According to some researchers (for example, Bartol, 1978), a critical area in research on women managers, basically overlooked to this point, is the perceptions of female managers' superiors. On the contrary, much research has focused on subordinate perceptions or satisfaction (e.g., Bartol & Wortman, 1975; Cullen & Perrewe, 1981; unpublished study by Petty, Odewahn, Bruning & Thomason, cited in Terborg, 1977). Subordinates don't promote women managers, however, and stereotyped thinking by superiors about a woman's ability to function effectively as a manager may limit her ability to perform well and to be promoted. If a superior perceives that a woman is less aggressive, competitive, or forceful than her male counterpart, her manager may not require of the woman tasks which include such skills. This, in turn, may limit the female professional, keep her from developing these abilities, promote within the organization an image that she cannot perform these tasks, and thereby limit her promotional progress (Schein, 1978).

Larwood and Lockheed summarize this view well:

> Success in a career requires not only acceptable performance but also favorable evaluation of that performance. There seems to be little evidence that women, working alone, perform less well than men. However, a substantial body of research supports the assertion that an average woman's performance is evaluated less positively than the identical performance of an average man. Of course, evaluative differences are closely related to differences in rewards (Parcel & Cook, 1977). In a working environment, we see these differences translated to differences in salary, where women with equal skill, tenure, and education are paid less than men (Sommers, 1974; Staines, Quinn, & Shepard, 1976), sectoral differences in labor force participation by men and women (McLaughlin, 1978), and differences in willingness to promote men and women (Rosen & Jerdee, 1974). . . . When one considers the findings regarding discrimination in training, promotion, and hiring, (Rosen & Jerdee, 1974; Thompson, 1975), it seems likely that without exceptionally careful career management, many women will never attain significant management status. Thus this area of research is critically important. (1979, pp. 660-662)

Schein (1978) has called for research which separates out global performance evaluations from that of evaluations of specific behaviors. While she is particularly interested in whether successful women managers use specific stereotypically male versus female behaviors, we are also interested in the specific communication behaviors used by women professionals.

In the present research, we have investigated the perceptions females' supervisors have of their female employees' communication proficiency, assuming, as has been repeatedly discussed in the literature, that communication skills are a critical component of organizational effectiveness and promotability. While research has demonstrated that the perceptions of subordinates and superiors can differ significantly (i.e.,

Baird, 1977; Henemann, 1974; Thornton, 1968), such issues relating to the evaluation of female professionals' communication proficiencies have not been investigated. In particular, we have compared the evaluations of superiors with female employees' self-evaluations on a variety of of critically important communication tasks: business writing, interviewing, group decision-making process, oral presentations, managing conflict, leadership-management techniques, interpersonal relationships, communications technology, listening, motivating people, handling grievances, giving directions, delegating authority, negotiating skills, and diagnosing organizational problems (Beam, 1981; David, 1983; Day & Stogdill, 1972; DiSalvo, Larson, & Seller, 1976; Goldhaber, 1983; Harris & Thomlison, 1984; Naisbitt, 1982; Renwick, 1977). We have also made a similar comparison between the supervisors' assessment of the importance of future training in each skill and the females' own assessment of their need for future training.

METHODS

Sample

Survey respondents were 122 female professionals and 80 of their direct supervisors all employed within private industry and governmental agencies within the ____ community. Occupation classifications for the female professionals were support personnel, technical, technical professional, supervisor, and manager. Specific occupation classifications were not reported for supervisors.

Procedures and Instrument

All participants self-administered a communication proficiency and

training survey designed to assess present level of proficiency in a variety of competency areas and to determine future communication training needs. Volunteers for the project were solicited from past participants in a university management development program for women. Questionnaires for both female professionals and their supervisors were distributed to volunteers who were asked to retain a survey packet for themselves and distribute a survey packet to their immediate supervisors. Both packets included letters describing the research project, questionnaires, and individual return envelopes. One-hundred twenty-two female professionals participated. The response rate for their supervisors was 66 percent.

The questionnaire for the female professional asked for assessment of her present level of proficiency and her future training needs for a variety of communication competency areas. The survey for supervisors requested a proficiency assessment and future training need identification for the supervisor's specific subordinate participating in the research project. Questionnaires were coded to permit matching of supervisor and subordinate responses.

The categories for self and supervisory evaluation were business writing, interviewing, group decision-making processes, oral presentations, managing conflict, leadership/management techniques, interpersonal relationships, communications technology (computers, telecommunication, etc.), listening, motivating people, handling grievances, giving directions, delegating authority, negotiating skills, and diagnosing organizational problems. For the proficiency assessment a scale of one to seven was used to rate the degree of proficiency for each

competency. Rating categories were labeled as follows: 1=weak; 2=fair; 3=somewhat good; 4=average; 5=rather good; 6=very good; and 7=exceptional (S. E. Jones, personal communication, April 6, 1984). For the importance of future training evaluation a scale of one to seven was used to rate the degree of importance for each competency. Rating categories for training were as follows: 1=extremely unimportant; 2=unimportant; 3=somewhat unimportant; 4=somewhat important; 5=rather important; 6=very important; and 7=extremely important.

Data Analysis

Two types of analyses were used. Initially, means and standard deviations were computed for each competency for both proficiency and training need assessments. The mean rating for importance of future training minus the mean rating for present level of proficiency was utilized to determine a level of training need (Harris & Thomlison, 1984). The higher the differential, the greater the need for development in a particular competency level. Secondly, responses for female professionals were matched with responses from their specific supervisors. Scores from these 80 matched pairs were correlated utilizing Pearson product-moment correlation to determine the level of agreement for proficiency evaluation and training need assessment between female professionals and their supervisors.

RESULTS

Cronbach's alphas were calculated for each of the four general competency proficiency categories. Cronbach's alpha for the supervisor proficiency categories was .92; supervisor training need categories .94;

subordinate proficiency categories .82; and subordinate training need categories .92.

For all 15 competency categories, female professionals described their proficiency as "somewhat good" to "rather good." Specifically, female professionals rated themselves as "somewnat good" in communications technology; "average" for business writing, interviewing, oral presentations, managing conflict, leadership/management techniques, handling grievances, negotiating skills, and diagnosing organizational problems; and "rather good" in group decision-making processes, interpersonal relationships, listening, motivating people, giving directions, and delegating authority. Supervisors described rated female subordinates as either "average" or "rather good" for all categories. Specifically, "rather good" ratings were reported for interpersonal relationships, listening, and giving directions with "average" ratings reported for the remaining categories.

Female professionals rated training in leadership/management techniques as "very important" and training in all other categories as "rather important". Supervisors, on the other hand, rated training in diagnosing organizational problems as "somewhat important" with all other categories described as "rather important." Finally, level of training need calculations for the female professional group identified oral presentations, managing conflict, leadership/management techniques, and negotiating skills as the primary competency areas in need of development. Training need calculations for supervisors identified managing conflict and leadership/management techniques as the two most

important development areas (Tables 1 & 2).

When agreement on proficiency level and training need was examined for supervisor/subordinate pairs, three of 15 proficiency categories and four of 15 training need areas were characterized by significant positive correlations. Specifically, supervisors and subordinates were in substantial agreement in describing proficiency levels for business writing, oral presentations, and communications technology. Agreement in assessment of training need was significant for interviewing, oral presentations, communications technology and diagnosing organizational problems. Two categories--oral presentations and communications technology--were significant for both proficiency and training need assessments (Table 3).

DISCUSSION

While this research is exploratory in nature, the results demonstrate striking and potentially important differences between the perceptions of female professionals and their supervisors. For example, female professionals as a group rated themselves as more proficient in 11 of 15 communication competency areas than did supervisors as a group. Female professionals also identified more developmental areas for training than did supervisors. While agreement in all categories would not be expected, these discrepancies may yield important insight into the subtle promotional difficulties women face.

The magnitude of these perceptual differences was especially notable when supervisor and subordinate proficiency and training assessments were paired for correlational analysis. In terms of communication proficiency,

females and their supervisors agreed on only 3 of 15 competency areas: business writing, oral presentations, and communications technology. These three areas, in comparison to the other twelve, are composed of somewhat concrete, overt skill sets. The quality of one's business writing, for example, can readily be evaluated; oral presentations are characterized by feedback based on results; and communications technology requires well defined expertise. What is more striking, however, than the agreement in these 3 areas, is the lack of agreement in the other more complex yet critically important competencies. Correlation coefficients for proficiency in such significant areas as group decision-making processes and leadership management techniques were so weak as to indicate virtually no agreement between female professionals and their supervisors. Supervisors, and female professionals both identified leadership-management techniques and managing conflict as important developmental needs. However, in matched responses for females and supervisors in these two areas, no correlations between degree of proficiency or training needs were found.

In terms of communication training needs, in all 15 areas of communication competencies, agreement was found in only 4 areas: interviewing, oral presentations, communications technology, and diagnosing organizational problems. Particularly noteworthy is the strength of the correlations and agreement between proficiency and training assessments for oral presentations and communications technology. Again, as we discussed earlier, we believe the nature of these skills makes agreement in these areas more likely. As before, we

believe the lack of agreement for training needs in critically complex competencies such as group decision-making processes, interpersonal relationships, motivating people, and delegating authority may be key to understanding the managerial development of female professionals and their subsequent promotional progress.

In general, the single most noteworthy finding of our research is the lack of agreement between a female professional and her supervisor in terms of both communication competencies and training needs. Given the pragmatic implications of these results, future research should continue to explore perceptual similarities and differences and compare these findings with female achievement levels and vertical mobility.

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Table 1

Self Assessments of Communication Skill Proficiency and Training Needs

Communication Skills	Means for Present Level of Proficiency	Means for Importance of Future Training	Level of Training Need
Business Writing	4.935	5.139	.204
Interviewing	4.444	5.250	.806
Group Decision-making Process	5.111	5.519	.408
Oral Presentations	4.500	5.657	1.157
Managing Conflict	4.565	5.806	1.241
Leadership/Management Techniques	4.685	6.037	1.352
Interpersonal Relationships	5.500	5.731	.231
Communications Technology (Computers, Telecommuniation, etc.)	3.925	5.402	1.477
Listening	5.417	5.685	.268
Motivating People	5.120	5.972	.852
Handling Grievances	4.557	5.565	.948
Giving Directions	5.481	5.750	.269
Delegating Authority	5.000	5.611	.611
Negotiating Skills	4.667	5.833	1.166
Diagnosing Organizational Problems	4.713	5.676	.963

Table 2

Supervisor Assessments of Subordinates Communication Skill Proficiency and Training Needs

Communication Skills	Means for Present Level of Proficiency	Means for Importance of Future Training	Level of Training Need
Business Writing	4.935	5.054	.119
Interviewing	4.478	5.100	.622
Group Decision-making Process	4.772	5.333	.561
Oral Presentations	4.967	5.055	.088
Managing Conflict	4.185	5.802	1.617
Leadership/Management Techniques	4.587	5.626	1.039
Interpersonal Relationships	5.172	5.560	.388
Communications Technology (Computers, Telecommunication, etc.)	4.700	5.409	.709
Listening	5.277	5.565	.288
Motivating People	4.745	5.576	.831
Handling Grievances	4.467	5.319	.852
Giving Directions	5.129	5.352	.223
Delegating Authority	4.538	5.165	.627
Negotiating Skills	4.516	5.187	.671
Diagnosing Organizational Problems	4.484	4.956	.472

Table 3

Correlation Coefficients for Supervisors and Female Subordinates for Proficiency and Training Evaluations of Various Communication Skills

	Evaluations N = 80	
	Proficiency Assessment	Training Need
Business Writing	.41***	.08
Interviewing	.09	.21*
Group Decision-making Process	.03	.04
Oral Presentations	.45***	.40***
Managing Conflict	.12	.11
Leadership/Management Techniques	.03	.16
Interpersonal Relationships	.15	.03
Communications Technology (Computers, Telecommunication, etc.)	.52***	.32**
Listening	.18	- .05
Motivating People	.14	.07
Handling Grievances	.17	.18
Giving Directions	.14	- .04
Delegating Authority	.11	- .02
Negotiating Skills	.06	.03
Diagnosing Organizational Problems	.10	.23*

* $p < .05$

** $p < .01$

*** $p < .001$